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PAINTING'S POINT MAN

Albert Oehlen at the New Museum.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



Oehlen's "Born to Be Late" (2001). No unity of composition, but unrelenting energy.

The German artist Albert Oehlen is the foremost painter of the era that has seen painting decline as the chief medium of new art. It's a dethronement that he honestly registers and oddly celebrates, as can be seen in "Home and Garden," at the New Museum. The first New York museum show for the sixty-year-old artist, it features twenty-seven works from key phases of his career. Large oils, at times combined with silk-screened digital imagery, may initially look like unholy messes: blowsy abstraction jostling with derelict figuration. Even Oehlen's passionate fans will confess to having felt a fierce dislike on first seeing his work, which goes beyond offending good taste to obliterating it. His handling of paint, at times with his fingers, yaws between

gesture and smear. Canvases in shrieking reds and greens alternate with ones in muddy hues or just grays—such as "Bad" (2003), in which a woman's head, a bathtub, and a leg in a high-heel shoe, all crudely drawn, wander in a brushy miasma of tones. (The artist has said that when he eschews color it is to intensify his appetite for it. You never know how seriously to take what he says, but it always tantalizes.) A black-and-white series, begun in 1992, deploys hectic designs created with primitive drawing software on a Texas Instruments computer; it made him the first significant artist to exploit, and incidentally to burlesque, the emergent lingua franca of computer graphics.

Give Oehlen a chance. There is as much philosophical heft to what he

won't allow himself, in the ways of order and balance, as in the stuttering virtuosity of what he does. His pictures possess no unity of composition, only unremitting energy. Everywhere your eye goes, it finds things to engage it; they just don't add up. There are stabs of beauty in passages that reveal Oehlen to be, almost grudgingly, a fantastic colorist, as with tender pinks and yellows, which echo halcyon Willem de Kooning, in "More Fire and Ice" (2001); fugitive dreamy purples, in "Untitled" (2009-11); and a clarion blue, in an otherwise murky "Untitled" (1989). If Oehlen has a method, it is to recoil, stroke by stroke, from conventional elegance—strangling one aborning stylistic grace after another. He has said that he was fascinated, early in his career, by American Action painting of the nineteen-fifties—a histrionic mode of pictorial rhetoric, superficially imitative of de Kooning, whom Oehlen cites as a hero. (The term was misapplied to Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, which exalt a canny control.) Oehlen's variant—call it "reaction painting"—fights back toward the Master's rigorous originality. (Oehlen's one prominently lacking resource is de Kooning's forte of drawing.)

Not for nothing is Oehlen a mighty influence on younger artists, showing them the rewards in freedom that may follow upon a willing sacrifice of propriety. (Witness, apart from outright imitators, the devilish impetuosity of Josh Smith, Joe Bradley, Oscar Murillo, and others in a recent survey at the Museum of Modern Art, "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World.") He shrugs off appealing to anyone who doesn't really—even helplessly—like painting, fulfilling a prophecy made years ago by the critic Dave Hickey: "Painting isn't dead except as a major art. From now on it will be a discourse of adepts, like jazz." In an interview in the New Museum catalogue, Oehlen speaks of "qualities that I want to see brought together: delicacy and coarseness, color and vagueness, and, underlying them all, a base note of hysteria." His is a dandyish aesthetic, savoring its own, unresolvable contradictions. But it resonates with general conditions of art and life today. Among other things, Oehlen offers an insight

into why digital pictorial mediums can be exciting—and certainly are triumphant in global visual culture—but still fail to sustain intellectual interest or to nourish the soul. They are all in the head. Oehlen attacks with paint the shallow clamor of transferred digital pixelation and, in some works, glued-on advertising posters. He wrestles their visual quiddities—how they look, irrespective of what they represent—down into the body and makes them groan.

Oehlen came out of the creative hotbed that flourished in northern West Germany, especially Cologne, for two decades beginning in the early nineteen-sixties. Mentored at the start by Joseph Beuys, the scene gave rise to Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Blinky Palermo, Anselm Kiefer, Jörg Immendorff, the Neue Wilde neo-expressionists, and, as it disintegrated, Oehlen's close friend and collaborator, the lyrically self-loathing artistic provocateur and intermittent genius Martin Kippenberger, who died, at forty-four, of liver cancer, in 1997.

Oehlen was born in 1954, in Krefeld, a city intimate with neighboring Belgian and Dutch cultures. His father was a graphic designer; his mother died of complications from a neglected ear infection when he was four. At art school in Hamburg, in the late seventies, his primary teacher was Polke, whom he says he first enthusiastically emulated and then systematically opposed. Smoky, Maoist political frenzies, promoted by Immendorff, engaged him for a while, though not exclusively. "Mao was O.K.," Oehlen told me when I spoke with him recently, "but not without Frank Zappa and Andy Warhol." (When I asked who his favorite musician is, his answer seemed perfectly unsurprising: the free-jazz revolutionary Ornette Coleman.) An ambient skepticism about the viability of serious painting affected Oehlen, even as his gifts inclined him toward it. Such early, determinedly cloddish figurative works in the New Museum show as "Self-Portrait as a Dutch Woman" (1983)—in which he sports a white bonnet, against a field of sprocket gears left over from an abandoned earlier version of the picture—won from Kippenberger the thrilled endorsement "It is not possible to paint worse than that!"

At the time, there seemed little to distinguish Oehlen from a Cologne crowd of painterly rascallions, whose equivalents in New York were led, and laced with home-brewed grandiosity, by Julian Schnabel. A decisive turn toward abstraction occurred in 1988, when Oehlen shared a house in Spain with Kippenberger, and the two artists closely tracked and critiqued each other's development. The result seems to have been less a Picasso-Braque melding of styles than an oil-water divergence. Kippenberger amplified his impulses as a hopscotching hellion, in work that included a torrent of images of his beer-bellied self, and Oehlen honed his focus on the problems of painting. An untitled work from that year makes a joke of the struggle: long white and gray strokes, which must have suggested tubular forms, receive lots of sketchy little red bracket shapes that would hold them down if they could attach to anything. Ever since, Oehlen's process has evinced endless sorts of borderline-desperate improvisation—until a painting isn't finished, exactly, but somehow beyond further aid. He told me, "People don't realize that when you are working on a painting, every day you are seeing something awful." The dramatic mood of the work is comic, beset by existential worry. It's as if each picture wondered, "What am I? Am I even art? O.K., but what does that mean?"

Lately, the demand for Oehlen's work has bubbled up from the middling range of the art market to the luxury zone. The happenstance disgruntles some observers—including, remarkably, the New Museum's superb director of exhibitions, Massimiliano Gioni, who notes, in the show's catalogue, that "the recent commercial success and mainstream assimilation of these works complicate their reception, stripping them of their critical edge." That would seem so only if relative penury and unpopularity define intellectual probity. Today, moneyed interest can befall just about anything, not always fatally. We will see if it corrupts Oehlen, stirs in him a supplementary type of rebelliousness, or, as I suspect, makes no practical difference in how his pictures affront the eyes and unsettle the minds of rich and poor alike. ♦